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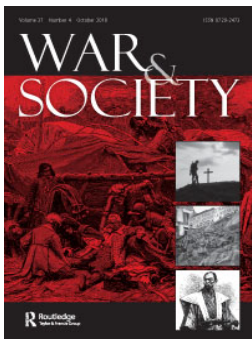
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Cameroonian *Schutztruppe* Soldiers in Spanish-Ruled Fernando Po during the First World War: A ‘Menace to the Peace’?¹

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When the German forces were ousted from Cameroon in early 1916, they fled south to neutral Spanish Guinea. Tens of thousands of Cameroonians joined them. Over 20,000 African soldiers and hangers-on were eventually accommodated by the Spanish authorities on the island Fernando Po, off the Cameroonian coast. Despite mounting Allied pressure on Spain to disband and repatriate the troops, they remained on the island until after armistice. They were largely under German control, and received military training during their internment. The delayed repatriation of Cameroonian soldiers, in 1919, had a pronounced effect on their communities at home.

KEYWORDS Cameroon, First World War, Fernando Po, *Schutztruppe*, African troops

When I was researching Christian missions and British colonial rule in Kom, in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon, I was surprised to learn that the vibrant Catholic community in this area had been founded not by European missionaries, but by local converts. Prominent among the Christian pioneers were former soldiers who had enlisted with the German armed forces (*Schutztruppe*) during the First World War and had been interned on Fernando Po, a Spanish Guinean island off the coast of Cameroon. In Kom, the Catholic campaign was led by former recruit Michael Timneng and a small but determined group of fellow ex-soldiers. Descendants of these former fighters recalled with pride the wartime activities of their forefathers. Little reference

¹ National Archives, London (henceforth NAL) CO649/10-4.3.16/10634, Brigadier General Dobell to Chief of Imperial General Staff, 4.2.1916.

was made to combat: returning home unscathed had shown the converts to be victorious. Instead, the fact that these ex-soldiers could speak German impressed my informants. Some mentioned uniforms and German-language catechisms, still in their possession, brought back from Fernando Po by the returning soldiers.² I soon learned that in many other Grassfields villages, ex-*Schutztruppe* soldiers had played leading roles in the establishment of Christian communities and schools, in the face of fierce opposition from both traditional leaders and the British colonial administration.³ For people in the Grassfields, the repatriation of the troops from Fernando Po perhaps altered power relations more tangibly than the transition from German to British rule did.

When the Germans were ousted by Allied forces from Cameroon in January 1916, they retreated to neighbouring neutral Spanish Guinea. Thousands of Cameroonian *Schutztruppe* soldiers and carriers accompanied them on a harrowing jungle trek to Bata, the administrative capital. They travelled with wives, carriers and servants in tow, in some cases with entire villages loyal to the Germans.⁴ Over 40,000 people sought refuge under the Spanish flag. Half were sent straight back to Cameroon, to prevent famine on the Spanish Rio Muni coast.⁵ Among the 20,000 who made it to Bata were 6000 *Schutztruppe* combatants.⁶ British and French authorities were disturbed by the presence of a large, disgruntled and restless enemy force on the West African coast, and pressed the Spanish government to disband the troops and to intern the German nationals in Spain. Instead, over 18,000 Cameroonians and a thousand Germans were transferred to Fernando Po. The island's population more than doubled.

Most of the Germans were later interned in Europe, but the Cameroonians were held on Fernando Po until well after the close of the war. The encampment of the German-Cameroonian troops and their followers only forty kilometres from

² C. Geary, 'Ludwig Brandl's historical notes on the kingdom of Kom,' *Paideuma*, 26 (1980), 71; I. Stokman, 'Kan een heiden 't geloof verbreiden?,' *Annalen der St. Joseph's Congregatie*, 39:6 (1928), 86.

³ J. Nielen, *A Short History of Wum Parish* (s.l., 1971); H. Skolaster, *Die Pallotiner in Kamerun: 25 Jahre Missionsarbeit* (Limburg a.d. Lahn, 1924); J. Plissonneau, 'Souvenirs de l'Adamaoua,' *La Regne (Revue des Prêtres du Sacre Coeur)*, 1937–1939.

⁴ Hundreds of Yaoundé chiefs and their followers joined the Germans to escape reprisals by the Allies. See: P. Laburthe-Tola, 'Charles Atangana (c. 1882–1943), un chef Camerounais entre deux colonisations,' *Mondes et Cultures* 58:2/4 (1998), 108–18; F. Quinn, 'An African reaction to World War I: The Beti of Cameroon,' *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 13:52 (1973), 722–31; F. Quinn, 'The impact of the First World War and its aftermath on the Beti of Cameroun,' in *Africa and the First World War*, ed. by M. Page (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), 171–85.

⁵ Some contemporary accounts show inflated figures. The numbers presented here reflect data from various published and archive sources, most of which are discussed below.

⁶ Large groups of non-combatants typically accompanied *Schutztruppe* companies. The German Colonel Rammstedt, for example, trekked to Bata with 17 Europeans, 145 native troops, 335 messengers, servants, craftsmen, carriers and horseboys, and 390 women, children and other relatives: F. Rammstedt, 'Krieg und Schutztruppe,' in *Kamerun: dargestellt in kolonialpolitischer, historischer, verkehrstechnischer, rassenkundlicher und rohstoffwirtschaftlicher Hinsicht*, ed. by W. Kemner (Berlin: Hermann Hilliger, 1941), 85–7. F. Lange explained the system in *Massa, wann kommst du wieder? Zwischen Tschadsee und Götterberg. Erlebnisse im Kampf um Kamerun* (Düsseldorf: Völkischer Verlag, 1942), 19–20.

the Cameroonian coast caused the Allies great anxiety. The naval significance of the island was obvious. The soldiers' camps could hardly be considered wartime internment, and German officers continued to drill the troops. Weaponry was smuggled into Spanish territory, clearly with Spanish connivance. German and Spanish armed forces and civil administration not only fraternised, but appeared to operate as one. British pressure on Spanish authorities to repatriate the troops had no effect. Rather, the Governor General and the Spanish officers turned a blind eye to what was clearly a German attempt to establish a military base off the West African coast.

The retreat to Spanish Muni

Many who followed the Germans into Spanish Guinea were inspired by loyalty to the Germans.⁷ Others fled to avoid maltreatment by the French or the British—or the Germans, should they return.⁸ Some hoped to be sent to theatres of war in Europe. The German governor in Cameroon, Ebermaier, promised that loyalty to the Germans came with advantages: 'You natives, who have lived with the Germans for a generation, know that the Germans are strict, but just. Those of you who help our enemy (...) will experience our severity. But those who remain loyal to us will be rewarded.'⁹ Cameroonian soldiers and government officials loyal to the Germans were exempted from corporal punishment, for 'he who serves the Germans faithfully will be treated like a German, and share in the privileges of the Germans.'¹⁰

Whatever their reasons for joining the retreating columns, few could have anticipated the difficulties of the trek. The journey involved 10–12 days of 10–12-hr marches through 'unbelievably difficult terrain,' according to German Commander Zimmerman, with countless rivers and creeks, mountains and then swamps.¹¹ 'The

⁷ K.W.H. Koch, *Im Tropenhelm. Kriegstagebuch eines Kamerunkämpfers* (Düsseldorf: Flöder, 1931); Lange; Rammstedt; A. Ritter, *Frieden und Krieg in Kamerun: Ein Erlebnisbericht* (Suhl: Strom, 1939); J. Scholze, *Deutsches Heldentum am Kameruner Götterberg: Allerlei Weltkriegspalaver* (Offenburg: A. Reiff, 1934). But German troops at Garua (Northern Cameroon) mutinied: Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde (henceforth BBL) R1001/3991, Auszug aus einem Bericht unseres Geschäftsführers aus Spanien vom Juni 1916.

⁸ Thousands did *not* follow the Germans. Many deserted en route: fear was widespread that men would be forced to work on Fernando Po plantations, and women left behind (NAL/CO649/2-7.6.15, Dobell to Harcourt (SoS), 10.5.1915). Also: H. Pürschel, *Die Kaiserliche Schutztruppe für Kamerun: Gefüge und Aufgabe* (Berlin: Junker & Dünhaupt, 1936). Over 20,000 people, mostly carriers, fled (or were sent back) from Muni, reaching a British refugee camp at Campo destitute and famished. Food depots at Campo, Kribi and Duala provided for the refugees: NAL/CO649/8-17.7.16/33686, Report on Naval and Combined Naval & Military Operations in the Cameroons, 12.6.1916. The wartime British administration worried about ex-*Schutztruppe* soldiers roaming the countryside fully armed: Buea National Archives (henceforth BNA) AB1915/41, station diary Bamenda (Podevin). District Officer Podevin promised 'very serious penalties' for possession of arms or ammunition 'especially in case of ex-German soldiers' (BNA/Cf1915/1, Podevin to Lt. Governor at Lagos, n.d.).

⁹ Quoted in Ritter, 9.

¹⁰ *Kamerun Post*, 12.8.1914, *Extrablatt* 12, cited in Foreign Office, 'Treatment of Natives in the German Colonies,' in *Handbooks no. 132b* (London: HMSO, 1919).

¹¹ E. Zimmerman, *Meine Kriegsfahrt von Kamerun zur Heimat* (Berlin: Verlag Ullstein, 1915), 150–1.

jungle was crammed with people,' one observer recalled. 'Chiefs and their subjects, men and women and their children in long caravans (...) [and] many Hausa with heavily laden donkeys (...) and then again more soldiers, carriers, and groups of natives.'¹² The refugees faced traps, poisonous spears, swamps, thieves, and corpses. The further they marched, the more difficult it became to obtain food: everything had been eaten or destroyed by earlier convoys, and it was too dangerous to venture into villages to seek supplies. Caravans were commonly attacked—perhaps by levies armed by the British, perhaps by hostile indigenes angered by the invasion of their land—necessitating detours and exacerbating food shortages.¹³ The thousands of unarmed carriers—usually forced labour, and often prisoners of war—were easy targets.¹⁴ Although compelled to relinquish their weapons at the border, the German officers were able to obtain high-quality Spanish weapons and ammunition, and the troops retained their spears and cutlasses. Guerrilla warfare, ambushes, illness, hunger and exhaustion took lives on all sides.¹⁵ What was once verdant forest had become wasteland, with even the smallest villages raided and destroyed to avenge the insurrection of unwilling chiefs, farms emptied and bridges demolished, whether by passing troops or by locals.¹⁶ One author commented that the suffering en route to Muni was worse than any of the suffering he witnessed in the Cameroons campaign.¹⁷ Thousands arrived in Bata destitute, disheartened and famished.

The Germans had good reason to expect a warm welcome from the authorities in Spanish Guinea. German firms had cocoa plantations and trading houses both on Fernando Po and on the mainland, and their agents were prominent among the merchant population. Before the war, Germany had enjoyed special privileges on Spanish Fernando Po in the form of a high-powered wireless transmission station, which it continued to use with Spanish connivance after the outbreak of war. In the early stages of the war, arms, ammunition, funds and provisions were smuggled to Cameroon via Spanish Muni. Convoys of rowboats and steamers under Spanish flag carried German mail and passengers between Bata and German stations on the Cameroon coast, evading the Allies' maritime blockade.¹⁸

Initially, the influx of thousands of people meant good business for the Bata merchants. German marks, French francs, Belgian and English coins garnered from

¹² E. Student, *Kameruns Kampf 1914–16* (Berlin: Bernard & Gräfe, 1937), 324.

¹³ Lange, 219; G. Kühnhold, *In Friedens- und Kriegszeiten in Kamerun* (Berlin: Scherl, 1917), 40–60; Pürschel, 57–81; Ritter, 255–63; H. Skolaster, *Krieg im Busch: Selbsterlebtes aus dem Kamerunkrieg* (Limburg a.d. Lahn: Pallotiner, 1918), 135–9; Student, 324–32.

¹⁴ Rammstedt, 84.

¹⁵ Lange, 219; Student, 325.

¹⁶ Kühnhold, 52.

¹⁷ Scholze, 226.

¹⁸ J. Osuntokun, 'Anglo-Spanish relations in West Africa during the First World War', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 7:2 (1974), 292. NAL/CO649/3, CO649/4 and CO649/5 hold reports of arms smuggling. The British consul at Barcelona reported (Feb. 1915) sugar, rice, meat and pumps, destined for trans-shipment to Bata and thence to Cameroon for the German forces (NAL/CO649/3-4.2.15/5826, Telegram Consul General Smith, 4.2.1915). Later 200 cases of cartridges, hidden in cocoa cylinders, were unloaded on Fernando Po under cover of darkness (NAL/CO649/3-1.9.15/40350, Consul Wilson to CO, 20.6.1915).

wages and raids were all readily accepted by the Spanish merchants.¹⁹ But supplies soon fell far short of what was needed to feed the swelling encampments of exhausted, hungry refugees. The Allies partially lifted the coastal blockade to enable food shipments from Fernando Po to Bata, but soon shortages of food, water and housing caused widespread illness and social unrest, with ‘appalling misery’ as a result.²⁰ Coastal communities and inhabitants of the Spanish Guinean island Corisco were compelled to contribute food to alleviate famine in Bata, to no avail.²¹ Raids of neighbouring villages by re-armed *Schutztruppe* companies in search of food contributed to the general insecurity.

The combination of famine, demoralisation and uncertain prospects in overcrowded army camps worried the British authorities. The Senior Naval Officer (SNO) in Douala noted that the Spanish armed forces in Muni were too few and too weak to handle the situation, and questioned the neutrality of the Spanish authorities.²² The British urged that the African refugees be repatriated at the first opportunity, and the Germans be interned in Europe. But the Spanish Governor General, Angel Barrera, was reluctant to let go what was potentially an enormous labour force. Since the establishment of cocoa and coffee plantations on Fernando Po in the late nineteenth century, labour shortages had plagued the Fernando Po administration. The local population refused to work on the plantations, and plantation labour from Cameroon and Nigeria fell far short of demand.²³

After brief negotiations, Barrera announced his intention, ‘with a view to preventing famine in Muni,’ to intern the German troops on Fernando Po, together with their followers and all European refugees, with the exception of missionaries and medical professionals.²⁴ In exchange he extracted a commitment that ships sailing between Fernando Po and Bata would not be subjected to inspection.²⁵ From Fernando Po, the Europeans would be transferred to Cadiz for internment.

This was not what the British had hoped for. The large contingent of German officers caused unease, especially in light of Barrera’s ‘enthusiastic panegyric of the Germans.’²⁶ As to the troops, Brigadier General Dobell, in charge of Anglo-French forces, pointed out that international law provided no grounds for their detention. But Barrera insisted that ‘it would be a breach of his neutrality if he allowed them to return home before the end of the war.’²⁷ Whether neutrality was Barrera’s

¹⁹ Koch, 270.

²⁰ ‘Ojeada,’ *LGE*, XIII:3 (10.2.1916), 35. The maritime blockade was lifted in March 1916.

²¹ ‘Correspondencia,’ *LGE*, XIII:6 (25.3.1916), 70.

²² NAL/CO640/8-2.16/5944, SNO Douala to Admiralty, 5.2.1916.

²³ Recruitment methods and working conditions resembling slavery had led to British restriction of labour recruitment from the mainland. I.K. Sundiata, ‘The rise and decline of Kru power: Fernando Po in the nineteenth century,’ *Liberian Studies Journal*, VI:1 (1975), 38. Also Chapter 7, ‘The search for labor’, in I. Sundiata, *From Slaving to Neoslavery* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 119–45.

²⁴ NAL/CO649/8-17.7.16/33686, Operations in the Cameroons, 12.6.1916 (Fuller).

²⁵ NAL/CO640/8-7.2.16/5944, SNO Douala to Admiralty, 5.2.1916.

²⁶ NAL/CO649/16-8.2.18/7358, Memorandum from FO (1918).

²⁷ NAL/CO649/10-4.3.16/10634, Dobell to CIGS, 4.3.1916.

prime concern is questionable. Rather, Dobell believed, the Governor anticipated payment for transporting and maintaining the German troops.²⁸

'God squeezes but he does not suffocate'²⁹

With hunger and disease rampant in mainland Spanish Guinea, the evacuation of refugees to Fernando Po was welcomed both by the internees and by those remaining behind in Bata. But the transfer was slow. Only three small ships were available, and passengers had to be rowed in small boats to the steamers off the coast.³⁰ Coal shortages curtailed the frequency of sailings.³¹ The first German troops left Bata in February, but people were still being shipped to Fernando Po half a year later.³² The British consul speculated that Barrera was delaying the evacuation of the German forces from Bata because he lacked the forces to control the African troops. 'If their German masters are all taken from Bata and some thousands of the native troops remain,' he wrote, 'they are quite likely to get out of hand, and if they make for the bush in the hope of getting back to Cameroon the unrest amongst the Pangwes would probably increase.'³³

Among the first refugees to reach Fernando Po were German Governor Ebermaier and Commander Zimmerman. The welcome offered Ebermaier by Barrera fuelled British doubts regarding Spanish neutrality. A local correspondent reported:³⁴

For nineteen months, the brave German defenders held their positions (...) At last, owing to lack of resources, and extricating themselves out of immense difficulties, these men of iron (...) took refuge under our flag (...) Yesterday, 160 Germans left Bata. They arrived here today on the steamer *Manuel L. Villaverde*, and together with their most esteemed Governor and invincible Captain Karl Ebermaier are placing themselves under the protection of our Excellency the Governor General (...) Our highest authority presented himself at the quay to receive His Eminence (...) He was greeted on arrival at the wharf by the bands and cornets playing the Spanish Royal March. He [Ebermaier] returned, with obvious feeling, the salute which our flag gave him (...) With considerable foresight our First Authority had already placed Government House at Basilé at his disposal, and to these heights the gallant Mr Ebermaier went that same evening. (...) Mr Ebermaier tasted the bread of tears when his subjects were disgraced and killed and is now eating the bread of

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ 'Ojeada,' *LGE*, XIII:8 (25.4.1916), 95.

³⁰ Koch, 282.

³¹ NAL/CO649/8-17.4.16/18081, Fuller to Admiralty, 9.3.1916.

³² The (non-combatant) Yaoundé left the mainland last: they had been temporarily resettled by the Spanish government south of Bata. See: *Ein Werk Deutscher Kolonisation auf Fernando Poo, Mitteilungsblatt des Traditionsverbandes Ehemaliger Schutz- und Überseetruppen/Freunde der Früheren Deutschen Schutzgebiete E.V.* (Berlin: Traditionsverband ehemaliger Schutz- und Überseetruppen, 1983), 5.

³³ NAL/CO649/8-17.4.16/18081, Frank Wilson, 7.3.1916. The term Pangwe refers to the largest indigenous group in Spanish Muni, also known as Fang.

³⁴ 'Ojeada', *LGE*, XIII:4 (25.2.1916), 46-47.

exile in a foreign land (...) yet he had the courage and strength to climb the steep slopes of Basilé without even having to wipe the perspiration from his brow.

The population of Fernando Po more than doubled due to the internment. In Santa Isabel alone, the population increased from about 2500 inhabitants to over 18,000.³⁵ The influx of so many potential labourers and consumers was welcomed, and a Fernandian newspaper speculated that the internment might enable the development of local agriculture, 'in such need of strong arms.'³⁶ Santa Isabel, already a multi-ethnic commercial centre, benefited from the hustle and bustle. German refugees were lodged in schools, shops, and even the market.³⁷ Warehouses were made available at the waterfront, houses and tents were built for the Europeans, and large camps outside town housed the troops. For merchants and traders on the island, this was a golden era. Germans and Cameroonians alike had money which they were eager to spend. Germans had smuggled savings out of Cameroon, and the troops received money for food and supplies from the German government. In addition, troops were paid wages that had been pending due to shortages of German money in Cameroon.³⁸ After months of isolation and deprivation, one observer reported, 'every European is resplendent in his new outfit.'³⁹ Troops seized the opportunity to acquire food, clothing and small luxuries such as pipes, tobacco and mouth organs. The main square at Santa Isabel became a colourful meeting place, where the army band played to an enthusiastic crowd. The Europeans entertained themselves at parties, and managed to drink the island's entire supply of wine and beer in a few weeks' time.⁴⁰

As on the mainland, demand soon surpassed supply. The extensive cocoa plantations provided no food, and local production was scant. The island depended heavily on imports, but wartime conditions at sea impeded the delivery of provisions. Over 5000 kg of rice was required *daily* to feed the camps near Santa Isabel alone.⁴¹ Starting in March, over 125 tonnes of food were imported monthly, but because there were no stocks a shipping delay of only a few weeks led to serious shortages.⁴² Food quickly became scarce for Europeans, for the troops, and for the people of Fernando Po alike. Rampant inflation went hand in hand with speculation and hoarding. Food prices increased fivefold in a few months' time.⁴³ People hunted for small game, lobster, crab and other seafood, and coconuts were requisitioned from the Spanish Guinean island Corisco. Hungry internees bought the last

³⁵ J. Vicent, 'ABC en Fernando Poo: Situación de la colonia,' *ABC*, (9.8.1916), 6.

³⁶ 'Ojeada,' *LGE*, XIII:8 (25.4.1916), 95.

³⁷ J. Vicent, 'ABC en Fernando Poo: La paz en Camerón,' *ABC*, (29.5.1916), 5-7.

³⁸ Rammstedt, 86; 'Ante los problemas,' *LGE*, XIII:11 (10.6.1916), 135-7.

³⁹ Kühnhold, 59.

⁴⁰ Ritter, 266; Introduction to G. Tessmann, 'Die Bubi auf Fernando Poo: Völkerkundliche Einzelbeschreibung eines Westafrikanischen Negerstammes. Herausgegeben von Prof. Fr. O. Rache' (PhD thesis, 1923).

⁴¹ 'Ojeada sobre la quincena: Vida Isabelina,' *LGE*, XIII:11 (10.6.1916), 129.

⁴² J. Mercader, 'Las subsistencias,' *LGE*, XV:19 (10.10.1918), 173; *Ein Werk Deutscher Kolonisation*, 19.

⁴³ Mercader, 'Noticias de la quincena'; BBL/R1001/3930, 'Klein Bococo bei San Carlos', report by Head Veterinarian Nordt, 1.4.1917.

plantains and palm oil from villagers, until Governor Barrera decreed trade in local food crops a government monopoly.⁴⁴

Only a few months after their arrival, the once honoured guests from Cameroon were described in the local press as a ‘plague of locusts’ dining at the ‘splendid Fernandian table, which was hardly adequate for those already here.’⁴⁵ Tension inside and outside the internment camps rose, leading a Spanish missionary to worry: ‘Not only are the arms of the newcomers not working to the advantage of our economy, they may also one day be raised to plunge us into misery and further disaster.’⁴⁶

The camps

Upon arrival, the troops were directed to the outskirts of Isabel, to build two large camps.⁴⁷ The ex-combatants were grouped into the same company formations as during active military service: 12 companies of 500 men per company.⁴⁸ Each company further included between 700 and 800 women, children and servants, and 50 carriers. A small number of German officers and non-commissioned officers was stationed in each camp.

Conditions in the first few months were appalling. Part of the land allotted to the camps was a swampy area which flooded easily and was infested with mosquitoes and other insects. Other parts were dense, dark wilderness. For those who arrived in ill health, in particular, the food shortages and the unfamiliar, humid climate were hazardous.⁴⁹ Initially there was no housing for the troops, and even the most elementary shelter could not be constructed for lack of building materials, which had to be carried in from forests 15 km away. Groups of 200–300 troops trekked uphill daily to collect headloads of wood, bark, bamboo, palm branches, and other building supplies: ‘endless lines of people walking with huge loads of banana leaves, palm ribs and cuttings that will form their meagre and miserable huts,’ a missionary recorded.⁵⁰ British agents observed ‘a good deal of sickness and deaths,’ and counted 1800 native troops on the sick list in September 1916.⁵¹

⁴⁴ J. Vicent, ‘Los campementos Alemanes de internación,’ *ABC* (29.11.1916), 31–5; J. Mercader, ‘Esperando,’ *LGE*, XV:18 (25.9.1918), 165–6; J. Mercader, ‘Se aleja el espectro del hambre,’ *LGE*, XV:20 (25.10.1918), 181–2; J. Mercader, ‘Para tranquilidad pública,’ *LGE*, XV:21 (10.11.1918), 189–90.

⁴⁵ ‘Las salpicaduras,’ *LGE*, XIII:10 (25.5.1916), 109–14.

⁴⁶ ‘Ante los problemas,’ 135.

⁴⁷ NAL/CO649/8-17.4.16/18081, translation of Ebermaier’s orders, 25.2.1916. The Yaoundé built a camp (Klein Bokoko, or Bococo) at San Carlos, on the east of the island: BBL/R1001/3930, report by Nordt, 1.4.1917. See also *Ein Werk Deutscher Kolonisation*.

⁴⁸ Unless otherwise noted, details of the camps are derived from *Ein Werk Deutscher Kolonisation*, which closely follows the Spanish original: J. Vicent, *Una obra de colonización Alemana en Fernando Poo* (Madrid: Blass & Cia, 1920).

⁴⁹ Skolaster, *Krieg*, 139.

⁵⁰ Vicent, ‘Los campementos’; ‘Ojeada,’ *LGE*, XIII:8 (25.4.1916), 95.

⁵¹ NAL/CO649/8-23.8.16/40040, SNO Ruxton to Admiralty, 21.6.1916. Illness plagued European internees too: NAL/CO649/7-21.10.16/50462, Extract of report by SNO Phillimore, 6.9.1916.

'It was not uncommon,' a missionary wrote, 'to see emaciated, starving people along the roadside.'⁵² Spanish army physicians complained that the government, in the interest of economic gain, had overlooked the public health consequences of displacing such a large number of people of various ethnic backgrounds and age groups, and housing them, underfed, in cramped conditions.⁵³ Santa Isabel had no sewage system, and no clean water supply. According to one estimate, 3000 internees 'paid for their loyalty [to the Germans] with death' in the early months after the move to Fernando Po.⁵⁴

But within 6 months, the troops transformed the wilderness into organised, airy settlements. In one, a road was constructed along the entire 1.5-km length of the camp, lined on two sides with mango trees, both for shade and for fruit. The bush was cleared to allow for light and a sea breeze. Farms were established on three sides of the camp, with over 500 hectares of crops. Villages were laid out in tidy and efficient grids, with a large, level drilling field and houses for Europeans in the middle. Roads, paved with stones and lava sand and joined by bridges, connected the camps. Dams and dykes protected the new villages and farms from the sea. At first housing consisted of long barracks; these were later replaced by roomy houses with verandas and separate kitchens. The camps soon had hospitals, churches, leather workshops and stables, tailors' and carpentry workshops, and even designated areas for recycling or burning refuse. Health care was entrusted to a few German doctors, assisted by the interned priests Baumeister and Schuster.⁵⁵

The internment was nominal. People were free to move about, and engaged in a lively trade. Troops were permitted to visit Santa Isabel in small groups twice weekly at designated times.⁵⁶ Carriers and other non-combatants were put to work on cocoa plantations in what amounted to 'a grave scandal of forced labour' in British eyes.⁵⁷ Daily life for the former combatants and their families revolved around camp maintenance and construction, and the cultivation of food crops. The food supply was augmented by game.⁵⁸ After the first labour-intensive months, daily military drills resumed. These were considered especially necessary for the young, newly recruited troops, who lacked military training.⁵⁹

⁵² 'Ojeada sobre la quincena,' *LGE*, XIII:12 (25.6.1916), 143.

⁵³ R.M. Medina-Doménech, 'Paludismo, explotación y racismo científico en Guinea Ecuatorial (1900-1939),' in *La Acción Médico-Social contra el Paludismo en la España Metropolitana y Colonial del Siglo XX*, ed. by E. Rodríguez Ocaña and R. Ballester (Madrid: CSIC, 2003), 387-8.

⁵⁴ Scholze, 226. The Yaoundé people at Bokoko likewise suffered. Some 450 of the 2382 inhabitants in March 1917 were sick: BBL/R1001/3930, report by Nordt, 1.4.1917.

⁵⁵ The medical work of these priests was admired by Spanish medical personnel working in the camps in 1917. Baumeister and Schuster were credited with achieving a significant reduction in endemic disease in the camps through their 'magnificent labour': M. Martínez Cerro, 'El servicio sanitario en los campamentos de internamiento de Alemanes en Fernando Poo durante la Primera Guerra Mundial. Meritoria intervención de la Sanidad Naval (1916-1918),' *Revista General de Marina (Instituto de Historia y Cultura Naval)*, 228:2 (1995), 201.

⁵⁶ Vicent, 'Los campamentos'.

⁵⁷ NAL/CO649/8-17.4.16/18081, Fuller to Admiralty, 9.3.1916.

⁵⁸ 'Notas de Basilé,' *LGE* XV:11 (10.6.1918), 109.

⁵⁹ *Ein Werk*, 22.

Catholic missionaries, interned with the troops, organised doctrine classes and religious ceremonies in 'dangerously overcrowded' gatherings.⁶⁰

For the first 6 months, the camps were closed to outsiders, but on an August Sunday visitors were invited to admire what had been achieved.⁶¹ Guests were treated to dancing, games, refreshments, and an extensive tour. German, Spanish and British observers alike were impressed by the well-organised camps, 'a monument to German method, industry and ingenuity,' according to a British observer.⁶² But admiration readily gave way to uneasiness, for it was clear that the camps were run by the Germans, and not by the Spanish. German officers supervised labour, settled disputes, took care of the accounts and arranged the distribution of supplies. Orders were given in German, or in German and Spanish. Ebermaier had established an interim government at Santa Isabel, and issued proclamations 'as if the island belonged to them [the Germans],' the British consul complained.⁶³

Internment camp or military base?

From the perspective of the British Commander Dobell, the presence of thousands of trained recruits on Fernando Po was 'a menace to the peace of the Cameroons.'⁶⁴ The mainland was an easy target for attack, he reasoned, and with Spanish neutrality so apparently flimsy, German troops could easily be supplied with arms and ammunition. He speculated that a German takeover of Fernando Po would pose a new threat to the Allies, and convinced the Foreign Office to press Spain to remove the German officers and NCOs from the island. As a result, approximately 800 Germans were transferred to Spain in April and May 1916.⁶⁵

Still, hundreds of Germans remained, including at least eighty officers and 100 NCOs.⁶⁶ To Dobell's dismay, the troops continued their drilling under German officers. 'The men are clothed in brand new khaki uniforms with flat caps, belts and ammunition pouches,' a disgruntled official reported. 'Their discipline is perfect.'⁶⁷ Initially the drills were conducted unarmed, but later the troops were armed with weapons smuggled into the territory. At a military parade held in one of the camps in October 1916, the German commander broadcast that soon the

⁶⁰ F. Hennemann, *Werden und Wirken eines Afrika-Missionars* (Limburg a.d. Lahn: Pallotiner, 1922), 169; Baumeister, 'Vom Kriegs- und Missionsdienst unserer aus Kamerun vertriebenen Missionare,' *Das Reich des Herzen Jesu*, (1917), 245; C. Schuster, 'Im Gefangenenlager auf Fernando Po,' *Das Reich*, (1920).

⁶¹ Vicent, 'Los campementos'.

⁶² NAL/CO649/8-20.11.16/55531, Stobart (DO Victoria Division) to Lugard, 16.10.1916.

⁶³ NAL/CO649/8-17.4.16/18081, Frank Wilson, 7.3.1916.

⁶⁴ NAL/CO649/10-4.3.16/10634, Dobell to CIGS, 4.3.1916.

⁶⁵ NAL/CO649/8-17.7.16/33686, Operations in the Cameroons, 12.6.1916 (Fuller). Twenty of these escaped from Spain a few months later: S. del Molino, *Soldades en el Jardín de la Paz* (Zaragoza: Prames, 2009).

⁶⁶ NAL/CO649/8-17.7.16/33686, Operations in the Cameroons, 12.6.1916 (Fuller). Intelligence reports and later correspondence suggest higher numbers: NAL/CO 649/8-20.11.16/55531, Stobart (DO Victoria Division) to CO, 18.10.1916; NAL/CO649/12-2.4.17/17336, Phillimore, 2.4.1917.

⁶⁷ NAL/CO649/08-20.11.16/55531, Stobart (DO Victoria Division) to Lugard, 16.10.1916.

Germans would return victorious to Cameroon, and that the British were being beaten in Europe.⁶⁸ The German-Cameroonian military presence on Fernando Po far outnumbered that of the Spanish, who would be unable to prevent the Germans from carrying out an attack on the mainland.

British and French diplomats in Madrid insisted that the Spanish government make haste to repatriate the troops and remove the remaining German officers from Fernando Po. Prime Minister Romanones conceded to Hardinge, the British ambassador, that he 'was most anxious to get rid of these black troops and their German Officers. The maintenance of order among them (...) was a matter of considerable difficulty and anxiety to the Spanish authorities who seemed to doubt their [the troops'] willingness to obey Spanish officers.'⁶⁹ The Spanish Minister of State, Amalio Gimeno, complained of the cost of maintaining the Cameroonian troops and of the constant demands that fresh uniforms be supplied.⁷⁰ The Spanish cabinet regretted that Barrera had accommodated the German troops: their contribution in terms of plantation labour proved disappointing, for the Cameroonians refused to perform agricultural or manual labour.⁷¹

Having extracted from Romanones a commitment to repatriate the troops, Hardinge proposed a gradual transition from German to Spanish leadership in the camps. Specially selected Spanish officers were to be sent to the island, ships for the transportation of German officers to Spain were made available, and authorities on Fernando Po were instructed to 'afford every facility for the escape back to the mainland' of the troops and their families.⁷² But the impact of these efforts—mocked as 'delightfully Spanish' by the Colonial Office—was minimal: most of the 'replacement' officers spoke no German and could not communicate with the troops.⁷³ In November, Spain reiterated its intention to transfer the native rank and file to mainland Spanish Guinea, and to send the German officers to Spain, but when Senior Naval Officer Phillimore asked Barrera for passenger lists and shipping schedules, Barrera denied having received instructions.⁷⁴

Allied anxiety intensified when it transpired that arms and ammunition were being smuggled, apparently with Spanish support, to Fernando Po and perhaps to mainland Muni stores as well. Numerous intelligence reports pointed to the large-scale,

⁶⁸ NAL/CO649/05-30.10.16/51937, War Office to FO, 28.10.1916.

⁶⁹ NAL/CO649/7-21.10.16/50462, Hardinge to Viscount Grey, 12.8.1916.

⁷⁰ NAL/CO649/9-31.8.16/41183, Hardinge to Grey, 17.8.1916.

⁷¹ NAL/CO649/7-21.10.16/50462, Hardinge to Grey, 12.8.1916; NAL/CO649/9-31.8.16/41183, Hardinge to Grey, 17.8.1916.

⁷² NAL/CO649/7-21.10.16/50462, Hardinge to Grey, 12.8.1916; F. Romero Salvadó, 'Spain and the First World War: Neutrality and crisis' (PhD thesis, University of London, 1994), 146.

⁷³ NAL/CO649/9-31.8.16/41183, British ambassador to Grey, 17.8.1916; NAL/CO649/7-21.10.16/50462, Comments from CO re. Hardinge to Grey, 12.8.1916, and re. FO to Army Council, 23.8.1916.

⁷⁴ NAL/CO649/16-2.11.18/FO841, Barrera to Phillimore, 28.10.1916, and Phillimore to Barrera, 28.10.1916. Also NAL/CO649/9-8.11.16/53599, Hardinge to FO, 6.11.1916; NAL/CO649/9-11.11.16/54152, Hardinge to CO, 7.11.1916; NAL/CO649/16 8.2.18/7358, Memorandum from FO, n.d. (1918), re. reports from Phillimore 1916-1917.

well-organised re-armament of the troops.⁷⁵ No attempt was made to keep the weapons consignments secret: German troops cleaned weapons (unguarded) at the Public Works Department thrice weekly.⁷⁶ Captain Phillimore furthermore surmised—correctly, as it turned out—that the Germans also possessed machine guns.⁷⁷

Barrera's improbable insistence that the Germans had 'not a single firearm in their possession' merely deepened British suspicion of him. Phillimore noted that the Governor 'was very anxious to return home in November. (...) It is said that he made a lot of money out of them [the German troops] and is anxious to get away before trouble comes out of it and has probably arranged something with them [the Germans] accordingly.'⁷⁸ What was more, information from native secret agents suggested that a German coup was being planned to coincide with Barrera's furlough.⁷⁹

Were the interned Germans planning to attack the mainland? In July 1916, Senior Naval Officer Ruxton considered a descent on the Cameroonian coast 'quite feasible but not likely at present,' even if the Spanish stores of ammunition were seized.⁸⁰ But a few months later Stobart, the District Officer at Victoria (Cameroon), considered an attack plausible, directly from Fernando Po or via mainland Spanish Muni:

There are at least 6000 German soldiers (...) drawing full pay and full rations (...) A landing somewhere between Rio del Rey and Bata is quite feasible under the present conditions. The interned ships are ready for sea, and having infringed the law by the introduction of arms it is improbable that they [the German officers] would hesitate to go a step further and seize one of the Spanish or Portuguese boats which are frequently in the harbour. In numbers they [German forces] would be greatly superior to the whole of the Franco-British forces in the Cameroons and it is my considered opinion that should the Germans succeed in landing at some portion of the coast between Kribi and Bata they would be favourably received by the population, would receive ample supplies of food and carriers and would find a totally insufficient force barring their way into the country (...) My recent visit to Fernando Po has led me to the opinion that the Germans are planning some definite action and that any attempt which they may make will probably take place within the next few months, if only as an alternative to the inevitable increase of unrest among their troops (...).⁸¹

⁷⁵ Romero Salvadó, 145. See: NAL/CO649/8-20.11.16/55531, Stobart (DO Victoria Division) to Lugard, 16.10.1916; NAL/CO649/8-27.10.17/51522, SNO, 27.10.1916; NAL/CO649/5-30.10.16/51937, Deputy Governor General Nigeria to SoS (CO), 27.10.1916; NAL/CO649/8-20.11.16/55531, Stobart to Lugard, 18.10.1916.

⁷⁶ A shipment of magazine rifles arrived from Spain soon after the exodus from Bata, in boxes marked as food for the troops. When a box broke, exposing the rifles, Spanish customs officials stored the weapons at the PWD: NAL/CO649/8-20.11.16/55531, Stobart to Lugard, 18.10.1916.

⁷⁷ NAL/CO649/16-2.1.18/FO841, Report by Phillimore, 19.10.1916. Phillimore's suspicions later proved justified.

⁷⁸ NAL CO649/16-2.1.18/FO841, Report by Phillimore, 19.10.1916.

⁷⁹ NAL/CO649/5-30.10.16/51937, Deputy Governor General Nigeria to SoS (CO), 27.10.1916.

⁸⁰ NAL/CO649/8-23.8.16/40040, SNO Ruxton to Admiralty, 21.7.1916.

⁸¹ NAL/CO649/5-30.10.16/51937, WO to FO, 28.10.1916.

In another report, Stobart observed that there was little to prevent a German takeover of Fernando Po:

The Germans – European and native – can hardly be said to be ‘interned’. Though housed in various camps near Santa Isabel they are free to go wherever they like on the island. They preserve their ordinary routine of military discipline (...) (T)here is as far as one can see no check whatever on the nature of their imports except that of a corruptible Spanish customs officer (...) The Germans are virtually in possession of the town, as there are only one hundred Spanish native troops on the island and the Spanish arsenal is guarded by six men. (...) There is nothing, except international considerations, to prevent the Germans getting possession of the island by a *coup d’état*, obtaining a certain quantity of arms and ammunition (...) and embarking a force of say 4000 men in the interned vessels or in ships lying in the harbour (...) The German native troops in such a case would follow their officers who have them well in hand. (...) Probably this is not their present intention, although they must be perfectly aware that it is feasible. But their idea at present is to retain composite forces ready to return to the Cameroons immediately on the conclusion of hostilities. Events in Europe, however, depletion of troops from West Africa, or some local trouble in any of the West African colonies might lead them to entertain a scheme however desperate.⁸²

These reports caused quite a stir at the War Office. The secretary of the Army Council recalled the landing of contraband rifles and ammunition at Fernando Po during the Cameroons campaign: these had probably not been removed from the island since. Together with these arms, the newly reported shipments ‘must clearly place the German force in a position to terrorize the local Spanish officials.’⁸³ The escape from Spain of a group of German (ex-Cameroon) prisoners of war fuelled British disquiet regarding the possibility of ‘dangerous action’ on Fernando Po, ‘where presumably the arrangements for custody are likely to be less efficient than those in Spain.’⁸⁴ A German coup seemed likely. ‘And whilst the success of any such attempt would doubtless be short-lived,’ the writer concluded dryly, ‘an incident of this nature would be calculated to cause much unpleasantness.’⁸⁵

Stobart’s conjectures proved remarkably accurate. In *Massa, wann kommst du wieder?*, a German officer recalls plans to send a carefully chosen party of African soldiers, commanded by white officers and armed to the teeth, in big dugouts to the coast of Cameroon. The idea was that this small force would inspire the frustrated population of Cameroon to rise up against the British and the French.⁸⁶ German records show that preparations for the

⁸² NAL/CO649/7-21.10.16/50462, Stobart to Lugard, 4.9.1916. This idea was not new. Kamerun Governor Puttkamer earlier proposed to ‘acquire’ Fernando Po: J. von Puttkamer, *Gouverneursjahre in Kamerun* (Berlin: Stilke, 1912), 250.

⁸³ NAL/CO649/5-30.10.16/51937, WO to FO, 28.10.1916.

⁸⁴ NAL/CO649/10-30.11.16/57482, Comments CO on escape of German POWs, 13.11.1916.

⁸⁵ NAL/CO649/5-30.10.16/51937, WO to FO, 28.10.1916.

⁸⁶ Lange, 222.

remobilisation of troops on Fernando Po were underway in November 1916.⁸⁷ Interim commander Rammstedt called for reports on the numbers of soldiers fit for combat and the numbers of carriers available. Camp commanders tallied firearms held by Europeans, as well as weapons held by the troops, including machetes, axes large and small, knives, shovels and spades. Tents, cots, mosquito nets for Europeans, belts, carrier equipment—all was counted and registered. The commanders noted the numbers of soldiers who mastered drum language (264), and the number of Europeans versed in Morse code and light signalling. Military drilling was intensified.

Europeans received instructions to store a three-month supply of rations. Utmost secrecy was urged. Rammstedt considered clerks and house staff likely spies, and regarded native women with suspicion. Europeans not connected with the *Schutztruppe* were to be kept in the dark. In the event of questions, Rammstedt wrote, the explanation should be that these preparations were for re-occupation of Cameroon after the peace agreements. Should Spain be drawn into the war, the mobilisation efforts would be directed towards the defence of Fernando Po, rather than toward a re-occupation of Cameroon.

The War Office got wind of Rammstedt's plans. As a result of a 'notion' held by the Allies, Barrera was instructed to have all German weapons and hunting gear removed from the island. With great haste—and ample attention from the press—he arranged the shipping of German-owned canons and machine guns to Cadiz.⁸⁸ Captain Phillimore observed that this did not take care of the problem, for the consignments recently smuggled into the camps were left undisturbed.⁸⁹ And scarcely had Rammstedt's mobilisation been called to a halt, when the Governor of French Cameroun learned that a German coup was planned for January 1917.⁹⁰ Allied patience started to wear thin. The naval surveillance of the Santa Isabel port was intensified, and France threatened to terminate the line of communication by French steamship between Santa Isabel and Douala until the German officers were removed from Fernando Po.⁹¹

German officers replaced by Spaniards

Barrera insisted that the German officers remain on Fernando Po to ensure discipline among the native troops. Problems were likely to arise *after* the removal of the German officers, he conjectured. His opinion was shared by Major Giménez Pidal, commander of the Spanish troops. Spanish officers would need a year to become acquainted, Pidal said. The sergeants were unsuited to replace their German

⁸⁷ The remobilisation attempt is described in BBL/R1001/9524, Rammstedt to camp commanders Eymael, von Heigelin and von Sommerfeld, 30.10.1916, and idem, 1.11.1916. Figures reported to Rammstedt: BBL/R1001/9524, Statistik (Nov. 1916).

⁸⁸ BBL/R1001/9524, Rammstedt to Eymael, von Heigelin and von Sommerfeld, 9.11.1916; 'Ojeada,' *LGE*, XIII:22 (25.11.1916), 263.

⁸⁹ NAL/CO649/8-28.11.16/57241, SNO to Admiralty, 23.11.1916.

⁹⁰ NAL/CO649/8-14.12.16/60044, Lugard to CO, 14.12.1916.

⁹¹ NAL/CO649/10-14.12.16/59931, WO to Admiralty, 13.12.1916; NAL/CO649/9-11.11.16/54048, Hardinge to FO, n.d. (Nov. 1916).

counterparts, and the corporals even less so, being illiterate.⁹² Nonetheless, in response to continued Allied pressure, the Spanish Minister of State arranged in January 1917 for some forty German officers, including Rammstedt and the camp commanders Eymael, Heigelin and Sommerfeld, to be transferred to Spain.⁹³ Although some 40 German officers remained on the island, most important officers left. There appeared to be no intention, however, of sending the rank and file anywhere.

Spanish officers and marine infantry were withdrawn from Larache (Morocco) to maintain order in the camps. In addition to the commander and officers, 129 soldiers were sent to the island, three brass musicians, a drummer, a horse and a donkey.⁹⁴ Barrera's worries regarding unrest amongst the troops proved well founded. The presence of the Spanish troops meant 150 more mouths to feed, and friction arose between the *Schutztruppe* soldiers and the Spanish troops.⁹⁵ The latter were accused of abusing their power, and of seducing women both in the camps and in Santa Isabel. The Spanish officers tried to establish authority through harsh discipline and punishments deeply resented by the internees: beatings, imprisonment, and even chains and pillory. Even women and children were flogged if they were considered disobedient.⁹⁶ Tensions rose high. Rioting troops from the 8th company stormed Santa Isabel 'in protest against the brutal and savage treatment of one Lieutenant Abramowski,' and demanding to return to Cameroon. According to a Spanish informant, commander Pidal inflicted 'merciless, cruel punishment' on the rebels.⁹⁷

Nearly a year after the exodus from Cameroon, the most influential German leaders and a substantial amount of weaponry had been removed from Fernando Po. Although the troops remained, Allied apprehensions regarding armed attack abated somewhat. Other concerns came to the fore. Because of the prolonged military threat from Fernando Po, the transfer of British troops from West Africa to East Africa was delayed.⁹⁸ British officials in Cameroon complained that the lengthy internment of soldiers on Fernando Po fuelled the notion that the Germans

⁹² NAL/CO649/16-24.1.18/FO4454, Correspondence with ambassadors in Madrid and Paris, 24.1.1918.

⁹³ NAL/CO649/9-18.11.16/55252, Reply from Spanish Min. of State, n.d.; NAL/CO649/12-24.17/17336, Phillimore, 24.1917. Numerous influential Germans from Fernando Po were transferred to Spain but not interned. In Madrid, Ebermaier led a German firm which maintained a radio-telegraphic connection with the German War Office and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Hardinge noted that the provision of such facilities cast doubt on Spain's neutrality: NAL/CO649/16-18.4.18/19068, Hardinge to Min. of State, 23.1918.

⁹⁴ J. Cervera Pery, 'Presencia y esfuerzo: La infantería de marine en Guinea Ecuatorial,' *Revista General de Marina (Instituto de Historia y Cultura Naval)*, (2012), 24; C. Font Gavira, 'Tensión et cautiverio,' *La Gaceta de Guinea Ecuatorial*, 189 (2013).

⁹⁵ J. Vicent, 'ABC en Fernando Poo: Consumatum est!,' *ABC* (19.3.1917), 7-8.

⁹⁶ NAL/CO649/16-24.1.18/FO4454, Correspondence with ambassadors, 24.1.1918; Font Gavira, 'Tensión'.

⁹⁷ NAL/CO649/16-24.1.18/FO4454, Correspondence with ambassadors, 24.1.1918. The file holds no further information on the riot or on Lt. Abramowski's plight.

⁹⁸ NAL/CO649/7-21.10.16/50462, CO to FO, 28.10.1916. Lt. Gen. Smuts, anticipating troops from Nigeria, had 'already arranged to release the Indian troops urgently required by the War Office for Egypt, and any delay in the arrival of the Nigerian troops would seriously embarrass him'. Also NAL/CO649/5-30.10.16/51937, Deputy Governor General Nigeria to SoS, 27.10.1916.

would return, impeding the establishment of effective British rule. The Bamenda District Officer complained:

[N]one of the soldiers or carriers who belong to this Division and who were taken to Fernando Po have been returned and until these men are released and sent back to their homes, the present feeling of insecurity will remain. The Germans have no doubt retained these men – or at any rate the carriers – with the specific objective of creating such an impression. I think it may be safely assumed that enemy influence in this country is very much more active than is generally supposed. It is unreasonable to expect a people (...) to sit down practically in sight of their lost territory and not make every effort to keep themselves thoroughly posted with the turn of affairs (...). The indiscriminate manner in which enemy correspondence has been circulated amongst natives in these territories and the procedure which has been followed in discharging domestic servants from Fernando Po to wander up from the coast themselves, ostensibly for the purpose of ‘returning to their homes’ is an example of how very simple it is for the Germans at Fernando Po to establish a perfect system of intelligence and at the same time maintain their influence among certain sections of the community besides creating an atmosphere of uneasiness and an impression amongst the natives that their eventual return is to be regarded as a possibility.⁹⁹

Barrera under pressure

Another year on, no steps had been taken to repatriate the Cameroonians. It seemed evident that Barrera was ‘in collusion with the Germans interned on that island, and [was] making every effort to delay the execution of the arrangements made with the Spanish government for the repatriation.’¹⁰⁰ Captain Phillimore and the governor of French Cameroun paid Barrera an unexpected visit in January 1918, hoping to enlist his cooperation. But while he was ‘much perturbed’ by the joint visit and by the delay of a Spanish mail steamer held up for inspection at Dakar, Barrera could not be convinced to focus on the repatriation:¹⁰¹

He started upon the question of arms at once, stated definitely that there were no arms at all, that any attempt at a raid was ridiculous, and that even suggesting such a thing was an insult to him, and all this was said before a word about arms had been spoken (...) It was impossible to say if he was speaking the truth, or had been bought by the Germans, but I think the latter more probable.

Ambassador Hardinge in Madrid was directed to press for the removal of Barrera from his post, as were the Spanish ambassadors in London and Paris.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ BNA/Cb1917/1, Report nr. 3, Bamenda Division (Podevin).

¹⁰⁰ NAL/CO649/16-2.1.18/FO841, FO to Lord Bertie, Paris (draft), Jan. 1918.

¹⁰¹ NAL/CO649/16-2.1.18/FO841, Report of proceedings, 2.1.1918.

¹⁰² NAL/CO649/16-2.1.18/FO 841, FO to Hardinge, Madrid, Jan. 1918; NAL/CO649/16-24.1.18/FO4454, FO to Merry del Val, 22.1.1918; NAL/CO649/16-24.1.18/FO4454, Graham (FO) to Lord Bertie, Paris, 22.1.1918.

Addressing the new Spanish Minister of State, Hardinge reiterated that the Fernando Po internment was irreconcilable with Spanish neutrality, but Barrera ignored instructions to transfer the troops to Bata, and German officers promised the troops that they would remain on the island 'in spite of any order from Madrid, until the moment came for their victorious return.'¹⁰³

The tide appeared to change when German submarines appeared on the West African coast in April 1918. New reports showed that large consignments of arms had again been smuggled to the island.¹⁰⁴ A British admiral in Sierra Leone warned that a German attack was imminent, and a company of the Nigerian Regiment was rushed to Victoria, on the Cameroon coast, to forestall a German landing.¹⁰⁵ The British Army Council remarked that the failure of Spain to disarm, repatriate or effectively intern the German forces caused anxiety in the French and British colonies on the mainland, 'where the local forces are small and necessarily much scattered.'¹⁰⁶ Political instability in Spain exacerbated the general sense of insecurity.

In Madrid, Paris and Rome, mounting pressure to remedy the volatile situation on Fernando Po at last generated a promise from the Spanish Minister of State to recall Barrera. The officer next in rank would take charge until a successor could be sent. A new governor, to be appointed, would be repatriate the African troops. 'More than this I could not get him to promise,' Hardinge sighed.¹⁰⁷ With barely disguised sarcasm he addressed the new Spanish Minister of State, Eduardo Dato, shortly afterwards: 'You are no doubt about to inform us of the name of the new Governor, as well as the measures (...) no doubt already taken' to intern Ebermaier and repatriate the troops.¹⁰⁸

Repatriation: a happy ending?

Although Barrera was not present, the repatriation of the German troops did not commence until 1919, when it was initiated by the French administration in Cameroun, and not by the Spanish authorities. The British, who had been so anxious to have Barrera and the German officers removed from the island, left it

¹⁰³ NAL/CO649/16-11.2.18/7709, Hardinge to Min. of State, 17.1.1918; NAL/CO649/16-8.2.18/7358, Hardinge to Min. of State, 30.1.1919 (wrongly dated: should be 1918).

¹⁰⁴ Referred to in e.g. NAL/CO649/15-4.11.18/57413/conf/WAFF, Lt. Dorrington to Lt. Comm. Douglas, HQ Nigeria Regiment, 10.9.1918.

¹⁰⁵ NAL/CO583/66/18327, Lugard to CO 14.4.1918; NAL/CO583/66/26664, Lugard to CO 29.4.1918, cited in Osuntokun, 'Anglo-Spanish relations', 300.

¹⁰⁶ NAL/CO649/16-18.4.18/19187, WO to FO, 18.4.1918.

¹⁰⁷ NAL/CO649/16-26.3.18/15217, Downing Str. to under-SoS, Apr. 1918; NAL/CO649/16-22.4.18/20011, FO to Hardinge, Bertie, Rodd (Rome), 20.4.1918; NAL/CO649/16-26.3.18/15217, Hardinge to Balfour, 14.4.1918. The decision to recall Barrera was taken in March 1918, but was not effectuated until after the submarine incident: NAL/CO 649/16-19.3.18/14057, copy of telegram from Hardinge to FO, 15.3.1918.

¹⁰⁸ NAL/CO649/16-18.4.18/19068, Hardinge to Dato, n.d. Plantation owners and traders on Fernando Po protested Barrera's recall in a petition to the Minister of State: J. Vicent, 'El gobernador va a España,' *ABC* (24.5.1918), 5-6.

primarily to France to organise the repatriation, assuming (erroneously) that ‘the number from our spheres is small’.¹⁰⁹ With the military threat gone, the troops on Fernando Po were no longer perceived as a British concern.

Barrera’s recall to Spain was brief, and clearly intended to appease the Allies. In July 1918, shortly after being called to Spain to attend an ‘urgent government meeting’, he was promoted to Navy Captain.¹¹⁰ He returned to the island in 1919, remaining at his post until 1924. He did eventually organise the repatriation of most of the troops by Spanish steamers, submitting progress reports to the new administration in Cameroon.

Repatriation appears to have been uneventful if slow. Throughout 1919, Spanish steamers plied the waters between Santa Isabel and Douala, whence the soldiers were expected to make their way home.¹¹¹ The *Ciudad de Cadiz*, for example, left Santa Isabel on 16 October with the 10th and 12th companies, a total of 1889 men, women, children and servants.¹¹² A week later, the *Ciudad de Cadiz* and the *Antonico* repeated the journey, with 2138 people and their possessions on board.¹¹³ Passengers received 2 days’ food rations. The final contingent of Cameroonians—Yaoundé chiefs and their followers—was not repatriated until November 1920.¹¹⁴

The internment on Fernando Po had lasted far longer than anyone had expected. In 1916, internees, German and Spanish authorities alike had been confident that Cameroon would return to German control after a brief war. Not only had the war lasted longer than anticipated, the internment had dragged on even beyond armistice. When repatriation was finally launched in 1919, most internees greeted it with relief and enthusiasm. A German Yaoundé NCO probably spoke for many when—already in 1916—he complained to visiting Captain Phillimore that this ‘was not a black man’s war and had no interest for them [the native troops]; that they were well-fed, well-paid and newly clothed (...) but that they were homesick and wanted to return.’¹¹⁵ In 1917, a Spanish petitioner from Fernando Po insisted that the troops were on the island against their will. If they were consulted, he

¹⁰⁹ NAL/CO649/18-17.4.19/23689, Comment from CO re. Hardinge to Romanones, 5.4.1919.

¹¹⁰ J. Mercader, ‘Noticias,’ *LGE*, XV:14 (25.6.1918), 134. Vicent, ‘El gobernador’. Barrera’s new title was *Capitán de Fragata*.

¹¹¹ Not all went home. Several Cameroonian villages (presumably Yaoundé) were established near Bata by former refugees wishing to avoid French rule: BBL/R1001/3991, Rena (?) to Reichmann, Bata, 17.9.1919. Some interned soldiers from Liberia and Sierra Leone joined their Cameroonian wives in Cameroon (NAL/CO649/21-24.1.19/4256, translation of Barrera to Commissioner of French Republic in Douala, 15.10.1919; NAL/CO 649/21-24.1.19/4256, idem, 20.10.1919).

¹¹² NAL/CO649/21-24.1.19/4256, translation of Barrera to Commissioner of French Republic in Douala, 15.10.1919. The steamer carried 415 soldiers, 277 women, 72 children, 121 servants of the 12th company, and 487 soldiers, 334 women, 65 children, and 123 boys of the 10th company, also ‘a few sick people’ from the hospital, accompanied by nurses and servants.

¹¹³ NAL/CO 649/21-24.1.19/4256, translation of Barrera to Commissioner of French Republic in Douala, 20.10.1919. On board were the 9th and 11th companies, and 28 sick people with followers.

¹¹⁴ The last 150 internees left Fernando Po on 28 Nov. 1920: ‘Noticias de la colonia,’ *LGE*, XVII:23 (10.12.1920), 219.

¹¹⁵ NAL/CO649/16-2.1.18/FO841, Report by Phillimore, 19.10.1916; NAL/CO649/8-20.11.16/55531, Report by Sgt. Major A. Jacob in Stobart to CO, 18.10.1916.

contended, 'at least 10,000' would choose to return to Cameroon.¹¹⁶ In the same vein, an interned catechist exclaimed in exasperation in 1918 that he had been in this place, of which he had never heard, for over 2 years, 'and only God knows for how much longer.' Although his people were faring 'as well as possible,' they were becoming impatient and wished to return home.¹¹⁷

Now, in October 1919, thousands of elated Cameroonians filed through Santa Isabel en route to the harbour, 'filling the air with jubilant song' to the accompaniment of an impromptu band playing 'rustical' instruments.¹¹⁸ Business boomed again briefly in Santa Isabel. In all, the returning troops and their followers carried over 40,000 headloads and were accompanied by over two thousand hens, dogs, cats, pigs, sheep, goats and horses.¹¹⁹

Not all Cameroonians looked forward to returning home. A Spanish report noted 'great unwillingness' especially among the 'non-interned natives' to return to Cameroon, probably referring to the civilian Yaoundé refugees, or perhaps to soldiers' families and servants.¹²⁰ Some preferred the relative peace of Fernando Po, recalling strained relations in their home communities. Many enjoyed a higher status—both in social and in economic terms—than they would in their home villages. Perhaps some found it difficult to leave deceased family members behind.¹²¹ Many preferred to work on cotton plantations on the island, reluctant to return to Cameroon or to military life, whether German or French.¹²² Hardinge observed that Spanish rule was 'more easy-going' than German rule:¹²³

The picture drawn by Señor Dato of the reformed savage warrior from Cameroon joyfully picking cotton to protect his kindly Spanish employers against the effects of

¹¹⁶ NAL/CO649/16-24.1.18/FO4454, unknown Spanish correspondent, n.d. Some went to great lengths to escape from the island. Over 100 Kru men, stranded after working on Spanish ships, tried to return home as the war drew to a close, including seven who arrived in Victoria in a canoe in September 1918. They had boarded the *Ciudad de Cadiz* as deckhands at Monrovia in January, but were left in Santa Isabel because the ship would not call at Monrovia on the return voyage. Together with 78 other deck hands from Liberia, they had been put to work on plantations for subsistence pay (NAL/CO649/14-4.11.18/57413/conf/WAFF, Lt. Dorrington to Lt. Comm. Douglas, HQ Nigeria Regiment, 10.10.1918). Later, a group of four Kru men tried to escape, also in a canoe. Two drowned. The others were rescued by fishermen. These men had also been deckhands on the *Ciudad de Cadiz*. They were stranded on Fernando Po for nearly three years. The Spanish government employed them as painters (NAL/CO649/15-4.11.18/57413/conf/WAFF, Report by Lt. Dorrington, 27.9.1918).

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Hennemann, *Werden und Wirken*, 40-41. The catechist was also a judge in the native court in his camp.

¹¹⁸ 'De Santa Isabel', *LGE*, XVI:20 (25.10.1919), 174-5; BNA/Tb(1920)3, Barrera to Commissioner of the French Republic in Cameroun, 6.11.1919.

¹¹⁹ Ruiaz, 'Epilogando una obra colonial,' *LGE*, XVI:21 (10.11.1919), 178.

¹²⁰ NAL/CO750/3-11.9.19/52954/destroyed, Despatch from Madrid, 11.10.1919.

¹²¹ As repatriation came to an end, 400 internees built a cemetery where they were allowed to bury their dead free of charge. J. Mercader, 'Noticias de Santa Isabel,' *LGE*, XVI (10.6.1919), 121-2.

¹²² NAL/CO649/16-8.6.18/27871, Hardinge to FO, 1.6.1918; NAL/CO649/16-10.6.18/28253, Hardinge to Balfour, 1.6.1918. Some suggest that internees were retained by force by Spanish authorities to work on plantations: Osuntokun, 'Relations', 5.

¹²³ NAL/CO649/16-10.6.18/28253, Hardinge to Balfour, 1.6.1918.

the American blockade may perhaps sound a little idyllic, but if good wages are given and the work is easy, need not be regarded as pure romance.¹²⁴

Some were apparently pressured to return to Cameroon. Describing the last shipment of Cameroonians to Douala in 1919, Barrera mentioned that 'runaways are still being collected'.¹²⁵

When systematic repatriation started, thousands of Cameroonians had lived for over three years in close contact with Europeans in a community organised along German lines. The hierarchy in the camps differed from that at home; soldiers and their families lived in a multi-cultural settlement under European leadership. The recruits were organised in companies without reference to their ethnic backgrounds.¹²⁶ Social stratification and social mobility were based on criteria different from those pertaining at home. The relative scarcity of elder men meant social and political opportunities, but also competition, for younger men. Many acquired money, goods, and women. Thousands learned to read and write. Over 3500 received baptism; thousands more became catechumens. The impact of the exposure to Christianity in the camps was enormous, and set the soldiers even further apart from their peers at home.¹²⁷

On the mainland, the return of the ex-soldiers met with apprehension. The troops were greatly feared, having a reputation for abuse of power.¹²⁸ Many returned home in their uniforms, which they were immediately instructed by the British officials to shed.¹²⁹ Many had been sent to war by their chiefs because they were dissidents: their return refuelled old conflicts and altered the balance of power. Insubordination was widespread, and returning soldiers took advantage of post-war instability to establish their autonomy. Many returning soldiers contested both traditional and British authority, often referring to Christian teachings. The British prohibited German priests from returning to Cameroon, so ex-soldiers founded and fostered Christian communities independently.¹³⁰

¹²⁴ Hardinge referred to difficulties encountered by Spain in obtaining cotton due to wartime conditions.

¹²⁵ BNA/Tb(1920)3, Correspondence between Governor Spanish Guinea and French Commissary in Cameroun. Whether willingly or not, many internees remained on Fernando Po. Yaoundé and Hausa were the most numerous immigrants on the island a decade after repatriation. In 1930 a large Yaoundé community occupied a settlement north-east of Santa Isabel, where one of the internment camps had been situated. Local trade was in the hands of Hausa, most of whom had been servants of German officers: J. Arija, *La Guinea Española y sus Riquezas (Estudios Coloniales)* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1930), 138–40.

¹²⁶ K. Hausen, *Deutsche Kolonialherrschaft in Afrika: Wirtschaftsinteressen und Kolonialverwaltung in Kamerun vor 1914* (Freibourg, 1970), 136–7.

¹²⁷ Many were baptized on the eve of repatriation, and were admonished to establish Christian communities in their villages. In addition to the two *Herz Jesu* priests Baumeister and Schuster, two Pallotine priests (Zeus and Ruf), and some brothers worked in the camp mission: 'Missionsrundschaue: Kamerun,' *Die Katholischen Missionen* 1919/1920:7, 115. Ruf remained in Santa Isabel after the war as procurator of the Catholic mission (NAL/CO649/20-10.9.20/45183, P.E. Ruf, 18.9.1919).

¹²⁸ H.R. Rudin, *Germans in the Cameroons: 1884–1914. A Case Study in Modern Imperialism* (London, 1938), 197.

¹²⁹ BNA/Ab1917/40, Station diary Bamenda, various entries 1919.

¹³⁰ BNA/Sd1916/3, DO Crawford to Resident, 17.11.1919.

Well into the 1930s, the British worried that German loyalties might pose a threat to the British and French presence in Cameroon. These fears were not unfounded. As late as March 1919, ex-Governor Ebermaier nurtured the idea of a German military base on Fernando Po, reporting that German officers were travelling to Fernando Po to release native troops from their old company formations, to equip them, and to retrain them in new groups.¹³¹ With Barrera back in Santa Isabel, Ebermaier could again rely on the Spanish administration turning a blind eye.

Concluding remarks

The impotence—and the enduring patience—of the Allies is striking. Ambassador Hardinge was reluctant to endanger relations with Spain, who in turn wished to avoid aggravating Germany. ‘We can do nothing,’ the Colonial Office observed in 1918. ‘I suppose the French, who are also interested, are also holding their hands.’¹³² Wartime neutrality was contested in Spain, and domestic political instability plagued the administration.¹³³ Clearly, when it came to prolonging the internment, Barrera had support in Madrid. One wonders how much room for manoeuvre he had on Fernando Po, with the large refugee population on the island evidently under German control, and economic interests in both Spanish and German hands.

In this article, the internment was primarily approached from the British perspective, simply because British sources were most readily accessible. Research in Spanish and French archives and publications is called for, to clarify the Spanish and French perspectives. Further study of German sources can be expected to shed light on the German perspective: German authorities must have been aware of the smuggling of large consignments of weapons. How were these organised and financed?¹³⁴ Another promising avenue is perhaps also the most challenging, namely to look for the indigenous perspective.

A micro-perspective can sometimes further our understanding of the larger picture. In October 1919, some 400 ex-soldiers, 170 women, 50 children and 95 servants reached their homeland, Kom, in the Bamenda Grassfields, after a two-month trek from Douala.¹³⁵ Among them was Michael Timneng, who was introduced in the opening of this article. Timneng had been a houseboy for a German priest also interned on Fernando Po. His brother recalled:

News came to us that my brother and other soldiers were coming. My mother prepared food and sent me to meet them on the way and welcome them. The Fon

¹³¹ BBL/R1001/3930, Ebermaier to Kolonialamt, 18.3.1919.

¹³² NAL/CO649/16-31.1.18/5910, Comment CO re. Hardinge to Balfour, 16.1.1918.

¹³³ During the First World War, the government changed four times in Spain, and the fourth administration collapsed a month after Germany's capitulation in November 1918: Francisco J. Romero Salvadó, *Spain 1914-1918: Between War and Revolution*, London and New York, Routledge, 1999, Chronology of Main Events; Charles H. Cunningham, ‘Spain and the War’, *The American Political Science Review*, 1917; 11(3), 421-47.

¹³⁴ In May 1918, Ebermaier commended Olshausen (German consul on Fernando Po) for enabling the supply of war needs despite the blockade: BBL/R1001/3930/Tel. 888, Kaiserliches Gouvernement Kamerun (Madrid) to Kolonialamt Berlin, part 2, 23.5.1918.

¹³⁵ BNA/Cb1918/2, Annual Report Bamenda Division, 1919, 9.

[chief] had ordered that they come directly to the palace, bringing to him all the war booty. (...)

At Laikom [the palace], the Fon came out to meet the soldiers. My brother did not remove his cap. While he was talking, the Fon kept watching Timneng's boots. My brother told him it was a good thing to have been sent to be killed by the white man, because instead of killing him the white man had taught him the ways of the true and only God and had asked him to come back and preach his message to the Kom. He showed the true God's instructions [the catechism]. The Fon said it was a good thing, but ordered that they bring him the war booty. He inquired why their shoes were so large, and was told that they were used to kick people and break their bones and skulls. The Fon requested the soldiers to remove their boots and uniforms, and leave them at the palace. My brother swore an oath and told the Fon that could not be done. It was the first time in Kom history that the Fon's orders were denied to his face. ¹³⁶

Years of political and social upheaval ensued, as Timneng and his followers established a Catholic community which fundamentally challenged power relations and gender relations in Kom. Such encounters were of course not unique to Kom. The repatriation of such a large number of troops and hangers-on after such a lengthy internment had a direct, destabilizing and lasting impact, in Kom and in many other Cameroonian communities. Although the war was primarily a conflict between European powers, its impact on post-war Cameroon history is manifest, perhaps more in terms of local power relations than in terms of European administration. This description of the internment and repatriation of some 20,000 Cameroonians illustrates the extent to which this localized impact has been underestimated in research on colonial rule.

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¹³⁶ Interview Aloysius Ngomneng (Timneng's younger brother), Njinikom, 16.8.1994; Interview Patrick Tim (Timneng's son), Njinikom, 16.8.1994.